News



Sr. Yeronima Rybakova, left, holds part of a Ukrainian flag next to Sr. Josifa Lesnichenko, who teaches English at the school that the Sisters of the Order of St. Basil the Great operate in Ivano-Frankivsk, Ukraine, Sept. 3, 2022. (CNS/Rhina Guidos)

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Mere days before the second anniversary of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, women religious from that nation and the United States were recognized for their extraordinary efforts to bring Jesus Christ to those suffering from war, poverty and addiction.

On Feb. 22, the Sisters of the Order of St. Basil the Great were formally presented with the 2023-24 Lumen Christi Award, the highest honor conferred by Catholic Extension. Taking its name from the Latin words for "light of Christ," the Lumen Christi Award affirms those who radiate and reveal Christ's love where they serve.

"Today we are here because a group of women religious have gathered out of a sense of mission, to try to build up our Catholic faith and transform the world in which we live, (especially) at this horrific moment in the life of Ukraine," said Catholic Extension president Fr. Jack Wall.

The Basilian Sisters — who have communities in the U.S. and the order's native Ukraine, as well as in Argentina, Croatia, Poland, Romania and Slovakia — have become known for their tireless efforts to aid Ukrainian refugees and internally displaced persons amid Russia's brutal aggression, which continues attacks launched in 2014.

"We believe the light of Christ shines brightly in these women," Wall said.

The sisters were chosen from nominations submitted to Catholic Extension by 41 dioceses. Six other finalists each received $10,000 to support their ministries.

The Basilian Sisters received $25,000 to support their ministry among the poor and suffering in Ukraine. The Ukrainian Catholic Archeparchy of Philadelphia — whose Metropolitan Archbishop Borys Gudziak nominated the order — also received $25,000, as the order's Jesus, Lover of Humanity Province in Jenkintown has been based within the archeparchy for more than a century.

At the award celebration, which was hosted by the Ukrainian Educational and Cultural Center in Jenkintown, Gudziak immediately handed the archeparchy's

portion of the Lumen Christi award to Basilian Sr. Teodora Kopyn for use in her ministry to area Ukrainian refugees and to those in addiction and homelessness in Philadelphia's Kensington neighborhood, the city's epicenter for opioid addiction.

"I stand before you in deep humility and a heart filled with gratitude to God as I accept this award in the name of the people I serve," said Kopyn, a native of Ukraine's Zakarpattia region who as a child discerned an urgent call to help the impoverished.

She particularly thanked both God and Gudziak for giving her "the opportunity to help" her "friends on Kensington Avenue," which was once dubbed the East Coast's largest open-air heroin market by a Drug Enforcement Agency official.

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Basilian Sr. Lucia Murashko, who serves at her order's monastery in the Ukraine-held city of Zaporizhzhia less than 40 miles from the front line, showed a cellphone video of a destroyed Ukrainian village she had recently visited.

"I want to show you the world I saw a few weeks ago," she said.

Murashko also shared images of the injured soldiers and displaced Ukrainian families she serves, noting that children in particular have endured severe trauma from Russia's attacks.

She said a teen named Ivanko, seen in one photograph, told her he had lived some 20 months under Russian occupation, from which he had escaped by "a miracle."

"He said, 'I had to hide myself (from the Russians),' and he said that mothers usually hide their children ... underground, otherwise (Russian soldiers) would come and rape them," said Murashko.

"We are honoring our dear sisters for being the hands of Jesus here in Philadelphia (and) ... also on the front (in Ukraine), right there where the blood is flowing," said Gudziak in his remarks.

Basilian Sr. Joann Sosler, provincial superior of the Jenkintown-based province, Mother Danyila Vynnyk, provincial superior of the Holy Trinity Province in Ukraine, and Mother Marcela Runcan, the Rome-based general superior of the Basilian

Sisters, expressed their appreciation for the honor.

"We are gathered here today to say 'yes' once again to life and truth," Runcan said.

Among the more than 200 guests in attendance were Jonathan Peri, president of nearby Manor College, founded by the Basilian Sisters; Iryna Mazur, honorary consul of Ukraine to Philadelphia; and Ukrainian Catholic Fr. Mykhailo Dymyd, whose 27-year-old son Artem was killed in June 2022 while serving in Ukraine's armed forces. (In the Ukrainian Catholic Church, it is normative for married and celibate clergy to serve alongside one another.)

The witness of the Basilian Sisters is reflected in their being "present to someone who is truly suffering," Wall said, showing that "we are more than what is happening to us ... and (to) stand up with courage against the powers of darkness."